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From transition management to change in regular policy regimes.
Explaining different routes of policy renewal.

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Transition management is an attempt at developing a theoretical and operational approach to influence long-term societal change processes for sustainable development, taking account of the characteristics of transitions (Rotmans and Loorbach, 2010). Although quite some authors have reflected and commented upon transition management, detailed empirical studies are not that thick on the ground. In the existing studies, researchers have often taken a specific point of entry (discourse, power, democracy...) to study experiences. Furthermore, the research often focuses on the characteristics of the transition management processes themselves, while the influence of these processes on regular policy has rarely been studied empirically and in depth. Yet, if a transition is to succeed, new governance approaches will have to gain influence and change the discourse, the institutions and the associated actor and power configurations that shape regular policy. Loorbach mentioned already in 2007 that the effect of transition management on the regular policy context is “a hitherto barely explored topic of research” (Loorbach, 2007, p. 292). Except for a limited amount of studies (such as Kern, 2009), this has not fundamentally changed since then.

This paper explores the influence of new governance approaches such as transition management on the regular policy regime and uses an analytical framework that aims for an integral view on change. The main research question is: how do transition management processes influence existing policy regimes and policy practices? How can this influence be explained and what does it imply for the further development of transition governance? This general question will be answered by studying in depth two Flemish transition management processes and their relation with existing policy: the first process is in sustainable housing and building (called DuWoBo), the second in sustainable materials management (called Plan C). At the launch in 2004 and 2006, the Flemish government labelled both

processes as “experiments in innovative environmental policy”, but by 2012 they were still running, although both were going through a difficult period.

The analytical framework aims at providing an explanation of the influence of transition management on regular policy that takes account of the complex of factors that at are work and that has an eye for the relationship between these factors. The framework combines the multi-level perspective (MLP) of transition studies with the policy arrangements approach (PAA) mainly developed in environmental policy analysis (Arts et al., 2006, Arts and Leroy, 2006). While the MLP allows for a historically grounded analysis of the long-term development of a system, the PAA captures the different dimensions that are relevant when trying to understand change and stability in policy: discourse, rules of the game, actors and actor coalitions, resources and power. One of the main features of this framework is that it can provide a historically informed narrative of how the concerned transition management process should be situated in the long-term development of the socio-technical system and its policies, how it influences (or not) the policy regime and what kind of influence this is. The paper builds on several years of empirical research, based in interpretative policy analysis. The research used methods such as extensive participative observation, interviews, document and literature study.

The analyses of the two Flemish TM-processes show that while both fairly strictly followed the TM-approach as developed by Rotmans and Loorbach, the policy innovation they realised and their influence on the regular policy regime turned out quite differently. In the materials case, the TM-approach of Plan C succeeded in creating a new discourse for Flanders about sustainable materials management and in starting a network of frontrunners that, certainly until 2008, was the main voice in Flanders on sustainable materials management. From 2009 onwards, domestic and international political and societal dynamics in the materials system accelerated. The result of these dynamics is that a lot of actors have moved towards Plan C’s position and also occupy part of the sustainable materials terrain, invariably supported by more financial resources and organisational capacity. From the lone player on a previously almost unoccupied field, Plan C has become one small player among many in a field that quickly gets crowded. The mentioned dynamics are clearly visible in the regular policy regime. At Flemish level, the discourse has in a few years changed from waste and the waste hierarchy towards sustainable materials management and it is adopted by all main actors in the system. The sustainable materials discourse is no longer something reserved for a niche actor such as Plan C but is adopted by all regime actors. Rules and resources have also been adapted.

In the case of housing and building, the situation is much more complex. Also DuWoBo succeeded in formulating a common transition agenda and starting small scale experiments. The integrated, long-term view did however not break through in the policy regime. The current characteristics of the housing and building regime have a history that go back at least 150 years. This deeply rooted regime is moreover a complex construction of policy elements from different domains (spatial planning, housing, economic policy...), each with its own actors, discourse, rules, resources.

The DuWoBo TM-process has succeeded in creating around itself a small and still unstable arrangement focused on sustainability, but this is in fact one more addition to an already complex housing and building arrangement, with only a very limited integration with the other segments of the regime. Meanwhile, the old policy regime is still standing firmly, although under European influence a partial organisational and discursive renewal is visible, mainly in the energy segment of the regime.

One of the main lessons from the cases is that the changes that are visible in the policy regimes, cannot simply be explained by reference to the characteristics of both transition management processes. Although these play a role, in as far as policy change is taking place, it is much more influenced by other factors: the state of the historically grown regime at the moment of intervention, the presence and role of powerful government agencies and societal actors, the influence of structural transformation processes at landscape level, the smart coupling work of policy entrepreneurs, the translation of discourses in a language that speaks to the regime. The paper analyses how this interplay of factors with the TM processes produces different routes of policy renewal, but also how it can constrain the renewal that is feasible.

The paper ends with an assessment of the analytical framework. The framework seems strong in mapping and comparing policy arrangements, and in analysing the change and stability that happens within them over time. For interpreting how change (or stability) happens and what kind of patterns or mechanisms are behind it, it was however necessary to introduce refinements based on Kingdon's theory of agenda-setting, Hajer's discourse analysis, Hajer's concept of an institutional void, and Grin's power framework for transition studies.

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